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Cosmography and Geography in Ancient India with Special Reference to Jainism

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The Jains categorise the whole cosmos into the universe and the non-universe. The universe is believed to be shaped like a person standing with arms akimbo. It consists of three parts – upper world, middle world, and lower world. The first is exclusively inhabited by the gods and the third by infernal beings. The middle world, in which we live, has a circular continent called *Jambūdvīpa* at its centre. The southernmost part is divided into five parts and the central one is called *Bharata*. Many of these ideas are shared by Buddhism and Hinduism.

Introduction

Jainism, one of the three sources of Indian culture along with Buddhism and Hinduism, is believed to maintain the archaic form of the ancient thoughts. The animistic idea of living beings, i.e., the view of a single atom with various attributes, is an example of archaism. In this essay, we discuss the cosmography and geography of Jainism as one such primitive idea and compare it with those of the other Indian thought systems. Since Jainism has a long history, its doctrine has changed with time.

However, here we will describe the standard concepts of its cosmography and geography, without differentiating between its two main sects – Śvetāmbara and Digambara. The following discussion shall be limited to physical subjects. In Jainism, cosmography and geography are closely related to the karma theory. Therefore, the theory is referred to in relevant places. Though the descriptions are based on various scriptures written in Sanskrit and Prākṛit, the names of the places are quoted in the former.

Universal Person

First, let us understand the cosmos from the Jain perspective. They divide the whole cosmos into two portions – universe and non-universe. The former is an inhabited space and is limited while the latter surrounds the former and is infinite. All living beings, including gods and human beings, can only move within the universe and cannot go to the non-universe because there is no *dharmā*, which supports things to move.

This universe looks like a person with arms akimbo and legs slightly open. Therefore it is named *loka-puruṣa*, i.e., a universal person. The total height of this person is 14 *raju* (an astronomical unit of length) with a bottom width of seven *raju* and top and middle width of one *raju*.

The universe consists of three parts – upper world, middle world and lower world (*ūrdhvaloka*, *madhyamaloka* and *adholoka* in Sanskrit, respectively). The vertical lengths of the upper and the lower worlds are seven *raju*, while that of the middle world is 100,000 *yojana* (a geographical unit of length), which is very small in comparison with *raju*. Thus, as mentioned above, the total height of the universe is considered 14 *raju*. From the top to the bottom, in the centre of the universe, a river called *lokanadī* (universal river) runs. Its width is one *raju* consistently. This river has a great significance in the *karma* theory in Jainism because all living beings can only move in this part of the universe(fig. 1).

Fig.1. Universal Person(*Loka-puruṣa*)



(From Samghayanarayana loose-leaf manuscript India; ca. 16th century Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.)

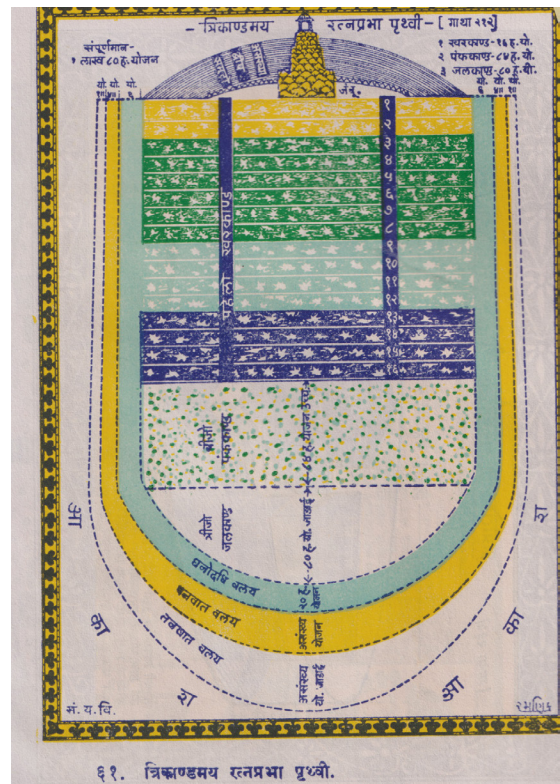
The Upper World and the Lower World

In ancient texts, the shape of the upper world is described as that of a kettle drum, narrow at the bottom, wide in the middle and narrow at the top again. This upper world consists of seven portions and only gods and *siddha* (those who have attained liberation or moksha from the human lifecycle) live. At the top of the world, *siddhaśīlā*, all liberated souls live and enjoy eternal pleasures. The rest of the world is inhabited by the gods. Just under the *siddhaśīlā*, 14 groups of gods live – five *anuttara* and nine *graiveyaka*. They appear different from the other gods and are called *kalpāṭīta*, i.e., one free from rules or administrative organisation. This can be understood from another point of view. In pictures, the five *anuttara* are depicted as five holes in the face of the *loka-puruṣa* – two eyes, a mouth and two nostrils. *Graiveyaka* means a necklace. These indicate that these 14 gods inhabit the face and the neck of the *loka-puruṣa*. The other gods, who live on the body, are controlled by *Indra*. Therefore, they are called *kalpopaka* or *kaplopapanna*, both meaning one who is ruled.

It must be noted that all the gods do not live in this part. Some of them inhabit the middle world and the lower world as well and shall be discussed later. From the construction of the upper world, we understand that the *siddha* lives over the gods. This reflects the Jain value that those who attain liberation are more respectable than the gods who remain in the stream of reincarnation or *saṃsāra*.

The lower world has the shape of a bed or a trapezium and consists of seven strata. The height of each stratum is one *raju*, however, the width is maximum at the lowest stratum and minimum at the uppermost stratum. Each stratum stands on dense water, dense air and thin air that form the three layers from top to bottom. These seven strata do not touch each other and there are spaces between them. Thus, a stratum with three layers under it floats in space. More accurately, it hovers in the universe. However, they are connected, in a sense, by the *lokanaḍī* flowing through the centre (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: The Hell of *Ratnaprabha*



(From *Bṛhatsaṃgrahī sūtra*. 1993 Palitna(?))

There are *naraka* or hells in all the strata, however, the number of the hells is not the same in each stratum. As indicated by the existence of hells, the lower world is a dwelling place for infernal beings. They suffer from various physical and mental pains and inflict pain on each other. Especially, those in the upper three strata are tortured by the gods, *asura*. This means, as implied above, there are gods even in the hells.

It may sound bizarre that infernal beings are born clairvoyant. The gods, too, are born clairvoyant while human beings can attain it by austerity. The reason for the clairvoyance of the inhabitants of the lower world is not clear, however, it may be assumed as a further form of punishment where they can see the awful conditions of hell and feel miserable.

Though we cannot find any texts that refer to illuminating objects, such as the sun or the moon, in the lower world, the upper part of the world seems to be bright because it is called *ratnaprabha*, or the one that shines like a gem. Nevertheless, the bottom stratum, *mahātamoprabhā* or the one with great darkness, is covered in dense darkness.

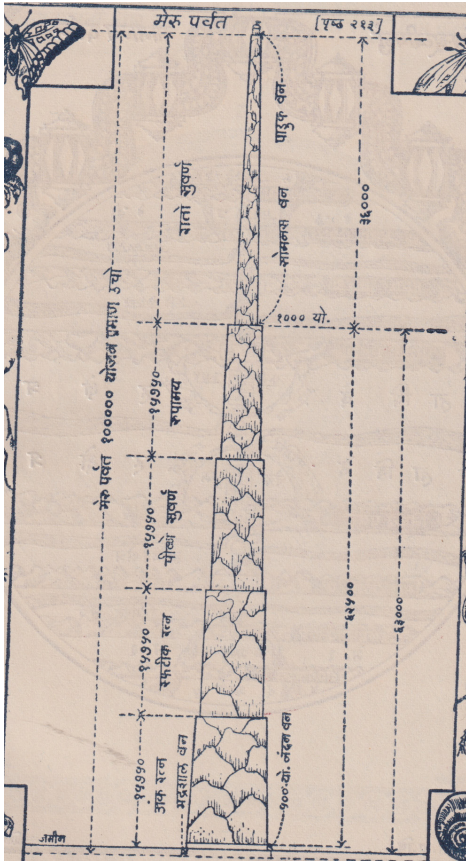
This indicates that the Jains attribute value-free terms to the two parts of the universe. Instead of heaven and hell, they have the upper world (*ūrdhvaloka*) and the lower world (*adholoka*) because, in the former, the gods do not hold the highest position and the latter, too, is inhabited by gods.

The middle world

The middle part must be explored in detail because living beings, including humans, live here. The middle world is shaped like a cymbal. Overall, it is circular and its diameter is one *rajju* with a height of 10,000 *yojana* at the top most part, therefore, it is called *tiryagloka* or the horizontally spread world. This world has seven continents and oceans. The continent at the very centre is *Jambūdvīpa* with a discus-like shape. The other continents and oceans form a ring around them. The central continent is called *Jambū* because of a tree called *jambū* in the centre of it. The continent has a width of 100,000 *yojana*.

At its navel, this continent has a mountain called Meru or *Maṇḍala* (discussed later). There are seven zones or *kṣetra*, which are separated by six mountain ranges. The southernmost zone is *Bharata*, shaped like a curved bow, while the central zone is called *Videha*. Parallel to the northern part of *Bharata*, the *Himavan* mountain range extends from east to west and is twice as wide as *Bharata*. *Videha* is 64 times wider than *Bharata*. Since *Jambūdvīpa* is fundamentally symmetrical, *Airāvata*, the northern counterpart of *Bharata*, is of the same shape and width.

Fig. 3: Mount Meru



(From *Brhatsamgrani sutra*. 1993 Palitna(?))

Meru

Mount Meru, also called *Maṇḍala*, located at the centre of the *Jambūdvīpa*, is the axis mundi of the Jain cosmography. The height, as mentioned above, is 100,000 *yojana*, however, a part of it, i.e., 1,000 *yojana* at the bottom, is under the earth. Thus, we can see only 99,000 *yojanas*. It expands 10000 *yojanas* at the surface of the earth and 1000 *yojanas* at the top.

This mountain has four terraces, including the surface, and at each, there are woods or gardens named *Bhadraśāla*, *Nandana*, *Somasa*, and *Paṇḍaka*, respectively, starting from the surface to the peak. The peak, i.e., the top of the mountain and the middle world, is a place for the consecration of a person to be a saviour or *tīrthaṃkara*. When such a person is born in this world, *Indra* takes him/her to this peak and performs the ceremony by sprinkling colourful waters. Therefore, *Meru* occupies an important place in Jain cosmography (fig. 4).

Around mount Meru, celestial bodies move clockwise, including the suns, moons, planets, constellations and fixed stars. The Jains recognise that there are a pair of suns and a pair of moons in

this world that are gods belonging to a class called *jyotiṣka*. According to the Jain doctrine, other stars, too, are gods moving by themselves. Therefore, there are gods in the middle world too.

Karmabhūmi and *Bhogabhūmi*

As mentioned above, *Jambūdvīpa* has seven zones. Of them *Bharata*, *Airāvata* and *Videha* are *karmabhūmi* where living beings reside with their effort. In this *karmabhūmi*, they must labour. It is only from this place that human beings can move to the upper world to be born as a god and from where they may sink down to the seventh hell. The places other than *karmabhūmi* are called *bhogabhūmi*, where living beings reside without any labour, receiving all things necessary from the *kalpavṛkṣa* or the wishing tree.

Fig. 4. *Jambūdvīpa* and other places.



(*Aḍhī dvīpa* or Two and a Half Continents as per Jain cosmology. 1810 CE cloth painting from Gujarat.)

Conclusion

Readers may have noticed that certain proper names in this essay are found in both Buddhist and Hindu literature on cosmology. For example, *Jambūdvīpa* is translated as 閻浮提 in Chinese Buddhist texts. The idea that the middle world expands horizontally, like a circle, is common among the three trends of Indian thoughts. This is because they were born from one motherland. However, they have certain differences in the details. *Rajju*, as we have seen above, is used in Jainism as an astronomical unit of length while in Hinduism it is a unit of length in daily life. In addition, the idea and name of *lokanāḍī* are unique to Jainism. We may conclude that the cosmology in ancient India was fundamentally the same among the three Indian thought trends with differences in certain portions.

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